SE Opinion

HD **Rebound in greenhouse gases could set record; Post-pandemic recovery shouldn't come at cost of the environment**

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As humans isolate in their homes, marine life returns to the canals of Venice, leatherback turtles nest on empty Thai beaches in record numbers and foxes frolic in the heart of Toronto.

From the headlines, you might think COVID-19 is an environmental boon. The World Meteorological Association predicted global carbon emissions will drop six per cent in 2020 - the largest annual reduction since the Second World War. But behind the feel-good baby fox memes lie far more threatening stories, about world governments using the pandemic as cover to roll back environmental protections.

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On April 15, the United Nations issued an urgent global appeal after governments from several countries scrapped important regulations.

When China enforced isolation after the outbreak began in Wuhan, reductions in atmospheric pollution over huge parts of the country were visible to satellites after just one week. Unfortunately, that achievement may be short-lived now that China has suspended environmental standards for businesses to help them resume operations.

The United States government lowered fuel efficiency requirements for cars to boost the auto and oil industries. This is anticipated to result in an annual increase in carbon emissions of 900 million tons (more than Canada emits in one year). Meanwhile, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has halted environmental monitoring of companies indefinitely.

Even at home, some Canadian provinces have loosened environmental regulations under the blanket of COVID-19 measures.

Of course, we need to restart the economy, but forsaking environmental protection for short-term economic gain will only hurt us over time as issues such as climate change inflict greater long-term damage than COVID-19.

When the great recession struck in 2008, global carbon emissions dropped. When the economy rebounded during the next few years, emissions hit an all-time high. That's a dangerous pattern we are at risk of repeating in the aftermath of COVID-19, one we absolutely cannot afford. Despite the emissions drop, atmospheric CO2 still hit record levels in early May.

Meanwhile, we're losing more of nature's defences against greenhouses gases, like the Amazon rainforest. Since COVID-19, Brazil has reduced environmental monitoring, and the Amazon's Indigenous peoples, usually at the forefront protecting the rainforest from illegal loggers, are isolating to avoid the disease. Deforestation in one of the world's most vital ecosystems is accelerating.

We must find ways to make permanent the temporary gains created by the pandemic, like Milan, which has the worst air pollution in Italy. The city is taking advantage of empty streets to revamp its road network, reducing car usage in favour of bikes and public transportation. It's a small measure, but it's a start.

More than that, we need to make environmental measures part of the economic solution. Building green infrastructure like clean energy and more efficient buildings would provide the most cost-effective investment to restart the economy, according to economists who studied more than 700 stimulus policies enacted by G20 nations since 2008.

It is often said that every crisis is an opportunity. The countries that come out of this stronger in the long term will be the ones that realize it isn't a choice between economy and environment, but a chance to bring the two together. Craig Kielburger is co-founder of the WE Movement, which includes WE Charity, ME to WE Social Enterprise and WE Day.

ART / (See hardcopy for photo);

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